



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly
Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
Testimony of Interim Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell
April 28, 2015

Senator Duff, Representative Janowski, Senator Kane, Representative Buck-Taylor and other distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding my nomination for Commissioner of Education.

It is truly an honor to receive the support of the State Board of Education and to be nominated by the Governor for this role. Should I earn legislative support, it would be my distinct privilege to continue serving the students, teachers and families of Connecticut.

We are fortunate to live in a state where education receives strong bipartisan support as both a policy and budgetary priority. Thank you to the General Assembly for your continued, bipartisan attention and efforts on behalf of our students. As Commissioner, I would seek to continue the work we started together during Governor Malloy's administration and to continuously improving our systems.

Connecticut is not only home to the greatest teachers and students, but also to the greatest educational partners. As Commissioner, I would continue to strengthen our collaboration with the General Assembly and with all the state organizations representing our teachers, superintendents, principals, local boards of education, parents, advocates, and communities, among others.

I've been a Connecticut educator for over 25 years. I started my career as a social studies teacher in Farmington. Over the years, I planned and taught more lessons than I could count. And I have probably learned just as many. The experience and perspective I gained still helps inform the decisions I make today.

In January of 2015, the State Board of Education appointed me to be the Interim Commissioner of Education. Prior to my appointment as Interim Commissioner, I served as the State Department of Education's Chief Academic Officer, overseeing the Bureau of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, and the Standards Implementation Division.

We are fortunate to have such an incredibly skilled senior leadership and staff at the State Department of Education. They are consummate professionals devoted to providing the best possible support to our schools and districts.

Before joining the Department, I served as assistant superintendent of schools in Hartford, and in district leadership positions in both South Windsor and the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) magnet schools with a focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional learning.

A proud product of the Connecticut public school system, I attended the Monroe Public Schools as a child. From there, I went on to earn my bachelor's degree in Russian studies from Mount Holyoke

College, a master's degree in educational leadership from the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, and a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Hartford.

One of the guiding principles that inspired me to become a teacher still drives me today—the belief that all students have the potential to achieve great things. And it is the promise of public education to help them achieve the greatness that is inherent in each of them.

But, we know that this is often easier said than done. Many students and families face what can, at times, feel like insurmountable odds. Teachers and school leaders juggle multiple responsibilities as they work tirelessly to support students and families. It is important that they should never feel as though they carry any burden alone.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that all students—regardless of race, gender, family wealth, or zip-code—are prepared to succeed in college and careers.

In my time as Interim Commissioner, the potential for what we can accomplish has really come into focus. I've reflected on the progress we've made and the momentum we've gained. Our graduation rates are on the rise and achievement gaps are beginning to close.

Through the Alliance District program and the Commissioner's Network, we've been able to give help to the districts and schools that need it the most. As Commissioner, I look forward to continuing to refine the processes and sharpen our delivery of supports to accelerate their improvements.

We've made great strides in strengthening early childhood education in Connecticut. The creation of the Office of Early Childhood, the expansion of PK access to low-income families, and the heightened focus on early literacy has had a real impact. As Commissioner of Education, I would continue to support our close, working partnership with the Office of Early Childhood and others on these important initiatives.

We raised the bar for what students should know and be able to do. Our teachers, principals, and superintendents have risen to the occasion and are completing the transition. And we know that our students will rise to meet the challenge of these clearer, higher expectations—as they have always done.

Research consistently demonstrates that teachers and principals have a considerable impact on student achievement. We must work to continue to cultivate a coherent, robust career continuum that supports their professional development from induction to retirement.

There is no doubt much more work to be done.

Our achievement gaps remain too large. We must accelerate our rates of improvement and make certain that students are receiving appropriate and adequate support.

State and local communities have invested considerable time, effort and resources to implementing bold initiatives and innovative strategies designed to support better outcomes for all our learners. It's imperative that all our systems are aligned and working seamlessly together. Moving forward, it will be

important to continue the state's efforts to provide high quality technical assistance to better support local implementation efforts.

As Commissioner, one of my first priorities will be connecting directly with educational stakeholders throughout our state, visiting students in our schools, speaking with parents, listening to teachers, and hearing from local boards of education. I want to hear directly from them regarding their successes, anxieties, lessons-learned, and greatest challenges.

Their feedback will help ensure that our path forward is the best path forward. And if we are to succeed in doing what's best for our students, then we must make certain that we are all moving forward together.

Should I receive your support, I look forward to leading this important work that lies before us. Thank you for your time and attention. I humbly request your consideration and would be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.